Context and the Emerging Story:
Improvised Performance in Oral and Literate Societies

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> At Kasiman a solid wall of people surrounded the clearing that had been prepared for the actors near the marketplace. I managed to break through to the inside. At one end hung a pair of curtains; at the other sat the musicians. Two air-pressure lamps hung down the middle, lighting up the faces which rose around the clearing in tiers. Around the edge, forever inching forward, each hoping to get a better view, sat an unbroken line of naked infants, solemn, patient, wide-awake.
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> The swift, light music had already begun. Two flutes rose high above the rapid, fluttering drums, now one ahead, now the other, clashing at times in casual discord, dissolving again in the purest of unisons. All at once there was the sound of singing; the first actor was announcing himself. The curtains quivered, opened, closed again, as though the actor could not bring himself to appear. At last they parted; the mantri, the prime minister, stepped forth; the play had begun.
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> What is the play? I asked Madé Tantra.
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> It's not yet certain, he replied. The story has not emerged.
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> Colin McPhee (1944:64)

When the American music scholar and composer Colin McPhee arrived in Bali in the early 1930s to study "the music of the East," he was surprised to find not only musicians able to improvise in performance, but also dramatic performers who followed a similar system (1944:2). Since in Bali music and drama go together, he had the occasion to attend many performances. In spite of McPhee's fears that "such music could not survive much longer," improvised musical as well as dramatic performances continue to take place: modernity and twentieth-century tourism have not stopped them (1944:79).

The fact that presentations by a group or a single actor are improvised is often lost on the Western observer. On the surface, while the actor struts about, when the musicians chime in just at the right moment, or when the audience rises because the event is over, a Balinese performance looks much like one in the West. But the processes by which a performance is created in Bali are very different from the processes familiar to us all in the Western tradition.

The most important difference, I believe, is that the Balinese performers do not memorize their roles from written librettos (although literacy among them is high), but continue to create improvised performances.[1]

In this paper I examine why the Balinese continue to improvise in performance in spite of the presence of writing, which leads me to investigate the more general supposition in Western scholarship that the advent or presence of literacy will, over time, supersede orality, and thus reduce the domain of oral (improvised) performance. Such an assessment can provide insights into other traditional systems, specifically the Greek performances of the Homeric poems. To provide a background to what follows I will briefly describe the relevant developments in orality research, from its initial framing to its current, more open, position.

The conflictive relationship between orality and literacy—where you have one you cannot have the other—was a key concept in the first phase of research into orality. A poet cannot be "*both* an oral and a written poet at any given time in his career,"[2] wrote Albert Lord in his seminal work, *The Singer of Tales*, which came out in 1960. Why the separation between writing and orality was so important to both Lord, and Milman Parry, his mentor, had more to do with the reasons that drove their initial research: the search for an explanation for the origins, transmission, and final fixation in alphabetic writing of the Homeric poems. Their fieldwork-based model convinced scholars that literate performers would hold an advantage over their illiterate brethren. Lord argued that singers would use their reading skills to simply memorize a text, and then perform it. Over time such literate memorizers would edge out their oral improvising colleagues because they offered their audiences a superior product: performances based on texts that had gradually undergone improvement until these texts became fixed not only in writing but also in presentation.[3] Since then, much has changed.

Ruth Finnegan's *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance, and Social Context*, appearing in 1977, offered a wider sample of different kinds of oral poetry, only a few of which fit into the strict Oral Theory as formulated by Albert Lord. Slowly, new ideas took shape, suggesting that orality and literacy be viewed as existing on a continuum, rather than as opposites. For instance,

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[1] The earliest evidence for a writing system in Bali is inscriptions that date from the 9th century CE; several inscriptions refer to performances, actors, and taxes related to performances. Some refer to episodes from the Indic heroic poems, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, texts that were brought to the Indonesian archipelago in written form, and which now exist with many variants, missing several books and episodes that may never have reached the islands.

[2] Amodio 2004:27, citing Lord 1960:129. The original scholarship of Parry and Lord is too well known for me to repeat it here; I highlight only the part of the research that concerns the present paper. A brief description of the Oral Theory and its foundations can be found in Foley 1988, espec. chapters 1-3.

[3] The authors who subscribe to this view are too many to enumerate: the idea was first articulated by Lord (although it was implied in the scholarship of many others), and was picked up and adjusted for dates according to individual authors' understanding. Gregory Nagy, in numerous publications (most importantly, 1996) argues for a later fixation in writing than most. He considers a *schema* of gradual fixation of the Homeric texts, analogous to a pattern developed by Stuart Blackburn (1989) for Indic heroic poetry.

El Poema de mio Cid and *Beowulf* now are believed to fit somewhere into a timeline that stretched from fully oral to fully literate: such texts are seen as "transitional" or "oral-derived."[4]

In his *The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology* (1988), Foley not only provided a basic introduction to the theoretical work on orality and its origins, but also recapitulated the many disciplines and geographical areas that were under study during the 1980s, incorporating developments and new insights. The Oral Theory had provided new approaches to almost anyone involved with literature, folklore, history, anthropology and (some) linguistics, and understandably scholars were eager to apply the new findings to their own fields. At the same time, *The Theory of Oral Composition* documents the main preoccupations of the time: the "oral-formulaic context," themes, formulas, and whether a work was "oral" in origin, or "oral-derived." Subsequent publications, as well as the journal *Oral Tradition* (started by Foley in 1986) continue to provide further world-wide examples of oral poetries, current as well as historical, and to depict the many ways oral poets function and maintain a foothold in their societies.

The role of literacy in the preservation of oral poetry and also in the creation of new (and old) oral poetry is now generally accepted, and now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, has liberated research and fieldwork from the earlier restraint that insinuated that "[oral poetry] must be everything written poetry wasn't" (Foley 2002:36).[5]

More fieldwork and data continues to be gathered by folklorists and anthropologists: they confirm what had already become apparent in Finnegan's work, that there were almost as many ways of composing oral poetry as there were practitioners of the art. The search for new answers led to a different emphasis in fieldwork. Lauri Honko (2000:11-12) notes that in the 1970s "a new paradigm was ready to question the basic tenets of the text-centered folklore research . . . It was dominated by the concept of "performance": the focus shifted from the words of the song to the singer and his/her performance, and in fact to the entire situation of performance, interaction with the audience and the processes of the construction of meaning in a particular cultural context."

Thus the single, one-size-must-fit-all, model is long gone, replaced by "all are different" sizes, and with emphasis on the *performative* aspect of oral poetry. The building blocks for the Parry-Lord model remain, and have proven immensely useful: improvisation in performance, the use of formulas and themes, the additive mode, the use of an archaic or obscure language, and so on, but, as it were, scholars have stepped back a bit and looked at the larger picture. As Honko (2000:13) puts it, "The shift of paradigms may be in the making as we turn to the new millennium . . . 'the performance is king' paradigm relativized texts, the next paradigm will probably relativize performance."

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[4] Foley 1990:329; Amodio 2004:27-30 on the slow changes (of which both audience and poets were probably unaware) that Anglo-Saxon (oral) poets underwent as literacy encroached on their domain: "They [poets composing in writing in the vernacular] represented a development of, rather than a departure from, the oral tradition that preceded them" (Amodio 2004:30). The transformation from oral to literate is slow, but in the case of mediaeval English literature, took place as described.

[5] For a summary of what "oral poetry" includes today, see Foley 2002:espec. 22-57 and 2005:196-212.

My own work parallels the history of scholarship on orality: my first encounter with Balinese performance in the early 1980s drove me to question the then-current focus on texts and their formulary, and the virtual prohibition against the discussion of the role of literacy. The problem with the Balinese, as I saw it, was the continuation of the use of improvisation in their performances, in spite of the presence of literacy and written texts. I was not able to solve this conundrum until the mid-nineties.[6] Many other students of South Asia and Southeast Asia had encountered similar obstacles and had drawn similar conclusions.[7]

But now, again ten years later, I believe there is more going on, given the overwhelming evidence from other societies that literacy indeed (slowly) pushes out oral improvised performances. Why would the Balinese be so different? To continue the metaphor introduced in the paragraph above, I was forced to step back even further so that an even larger picture could emerge: the performance as an integral part of a major event in a given society. This "stepping back" has allowed me to see the larger societal "context" as the main reason why performers would continue to improvise in performance, using written texts for guidance or inspiration, and why they next would create written texts that had definite oral characteristics.

Only a description of a performative event in Bali and all that it entails can describe what I mean by "context." Thus, I must begin by painting a picture of a Balinese performance and the staging of a play in the West. A close analysis of the Balinese system—supported by theoretical frameworks borrowed from anthropology, sociology, and performance arts—offers a new perspective on performance in ancient Greece by broadening our knowledge of the range of possibilities with respect to text fixation, memorization, and the interaction between performer, audience, society, and place. Archeological evidence ties ancient Greece into the larger framework I am trying to establish.

Balinese Performances and Their Setting

A Balinese performance changes each time it is given. The differences are not small, or just matters of phrasing or detail. A story told in performance can have a different ending or beginning, last one hour or four, have additional characters or fewer, be tragic one time and comical the next. Oftentimes, one single performer acts different characters, or tells a story in a dramatic monologue. In other words, it is not until the performance is *over* (or half-way over!) that a Balinese audience member can decide whether he or she has seen it before, as the quotation by McPhee in the introduction of this paper so nicely demonstrates. Such unexpected novelty is possible because the actor(s) improvise. All performers employ a variety of sources, including written plot summaries, fully written-out versions of epic poems describing historical events, and many stories that are well-known although not written down anywhere. Balinese performers are literate, some in the Balinese script and all in Indonesian, which uses *huruf latin* ("Latin script"). The customary explanation for improvisation in performance—illiteracy and/or

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[6] For a brief historical background to the Balinese improvisational technique, see de Vet 1996.

[7] See footnote 13.

lack of available written texts —can thus be discarded. The main reason for improvisation, the performers explain, is that it makes the stories more interesting, both for the audience and the performer. Improvisation allows for adjustment and adaptation to the current social situation in the village or town where the performance is given, a fact of which the audiences are well aware.

Dramatic performances always form part of larger events: usually temple festivals, or smaller family celebrations, such as the many rituals related to rites of passage. The performance must be connected to this event by content and by form: no play about witchcraft at a wedding, for instance! In the case of a temple festival, the performance will be paid for from the contributions that have been collected from those worshipping there. If the festival is large, with audiences attending from all over the island, the performer will consider it an honor to have been invited, and will receive just a small fee to cover his cost, plus just a bit extra. No festival or celebration can take place *without* a performance: performances are a necessary ingredient. Audience members do not pay (except perhaps indirectly through their contributions to the temple) for the privilege of attending a performance.

But the audience is not only human. In Bali, the gods expect to be entertained as well. A performance is as much an offering as is the food that is brought to the temples to be blessed. Performances serve to remind the divine audiences (as well as the human ones) of the ties that exist between them and their worshippers, and the connection between the village, its inhabitants, and the story told. Historical links between clans, villages, and kingdoms are recalled; the importance of ritual and sacrifice are reiterated, as are other moral messages. Thus a Balinese play is suitable for delivering a direct, up-to-date, and pertinent message: whereas a Western play can suggest that "le crime ne paye pas" *in general,* a Balinese play can make that connection the day after "le crime." For example, the recent illegal sale of land to politicians and influential rich developers to build more luxury hotels was lampooned in a play set in the fifteenth century. The fifteenth-century character lamented that, had he known how much the land would fetch later, he would have made sure to conquer it![8]

The above description of some of the factors that shape a Balinese performance already offers some insights as to why Balinese performances are constructed so differently from Western ones. In order to be successful, a performer needs to be aware of the pressing social circumstances in the village where he is to perform. As offerings paid for by the community, performances must tie into local events, affairs, and concerns. In other words, it is the *social environment* of the performance that influences its content: changes in that environment, or context, will affect the outcome.

At this point I must define "context" more precisely, since I will argue that it is the most important factor in the continuation of improvisation even if literacy is available. "Context" here includes anything that affects the content of a performance: the locale where the performance takes place (temple? someone's home? the beach?);[9] the reasons for its presentation (festival? private event? divinity involved?); who pays for, or sponsors, the performance (the community?

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[8] Personal observation, July 2002.

[9] Although many performances take place in temple courtyards, there is no limit on where a performance can occur; oftentimes, it is only the music that cues the audience on what they may be getting to see.

an individual?); and the date or time of performance (religious? private ritual? is the day auspicious or inauspicious?). Another loosely related factor might be the choice of performer, since each has a more or less known repertoire and abilities; also, the person or committee who chooses the performer will affect the outcome. The intended audience also may influence the choice of the play, or the delivery: some villages are considered to be more educated than others, or may have higher standards, and so on. The combination of all these factors plays a decisive role in the shaping of the performance: the performance and its language and story do not only reflect the society and its concerns, they are shaped by it.

However, saying that the environment, or context, shapes a performance is not telling the entire story; at the same time, the performance aims to influence the audience. As I stated above, the performance is an obligation, an offering, and a reaffirmation of the ties that bind the gods, humans, and their world. The story describes proper and improper behavior, contrasting past and present at dazzling speed, while critiquing human as well as divine foibles. The performance is not only *de*scriptive, but also *pre*scriptive: it attempts to influence or change society, or solve some immediate problem of human or divine origin.[10]

Context then, for a Balinese performance, is huge: it decides every single aspect of the performance itself. But, at the same time, the "context" cannot exist without the performance.[11] That is to say, in Balinese society, a festival without a performance is unthinkable. It would not only be considered a "cheap" festival, or a lackadaisical one; it would not be considered a festival, and the whole (much larger) event of which it forms part would have to be cancelled. And canceling a festival or celebration, or otherwise upsetting the ritual calendar, is unheard of. It does not happen. Doing so has terrible consequences. For example, in 1963 the Indonesian Government demanded the Balinese hold a once-in-a-century month-long ceremony to launch the President's "New Order." Such a request could not be refused. During the preparations for the festival, the main volcano on the island, Agung, began to rumble and smoke. Huge eruptions followed during the ceremonies, almost destroying the main temple complex at Besakih where the ceremonies were held, and wreaking devastation on the eastern part of the island. Many people died, and there was a great famine. Sukarno, the president, never showed. The Balinese—and many Indonesians—viewed these events as a divine response to typical over-reaching by a ruler. The political regime collapsed in 1965 (Lansing 1983:129-37).

To summarize, then, the context for a performance in Bali is everything one can imagine: what animals were sacrificed, what food was cooked, which people were in charge, who drove the truck, who provided the musicians, who came, and who did not come. If it started to rain, that

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[10] There is a vast literature on ritual (which includes performance) and its purpose(s) in anthropology. Authors or their theories are not detailed or specifically laid out here, since the main concepts are well accepted, although authors may differ on matters of detail. See, for instance, Durkheim 1968, Van Gennep 1960, Malinowski 1935, Radcliffe-Brown 1952, Turner 1969, Rappaport 1968, Schechner 1993, and Geertz 1973.

[11] My definition of "context" thus is very different from, for example, the meaning of "context" in a recent edited volume: *Oral Performance and its Context* (Mackie 2004), where the meaning of the word "context" seems to refer mostly to the (presumed) presence of other oral texts or oral media, a background against which the different authors' choices are profiled. Underlying each author's paper is the assumption that written texts were on the increase, and that the customs of orality were on the decrease, unless they were "oral" recitations of written texts.

is also part of the context (what were the gods thinking?). Henceforth, when I refer to "context" it is this larger frame of reference that I have in mind.

It is thus not surprising then that Parry and Lord focused on literacy as the underlying cause for the fading of oral improvisation. Given their interest in the textualization of the Homeric poems, in the illiteracy of Homer documented already in antiquity, and in the presence of oral improvised performances in areas of the Former Yugoslavia where illiteracy rates were high, it is not surprising that "literacy" was identified as the culprit for the disappearance of the oral medium. But, as we saw before, literacy in Bali—even in several different languages—does not seem to inhibit a performer's improvisational skills, nor does it affect his ability to compose written poetry in an oral style with the use of specialized ancient languages learned in childhood. The upshot of this simple observation is twofold. First, it follows that the advent of a writing system, or even general literacy, need not be an impediment to continued improvisation. Second, the arrival of the alphabet or a writing system need not be a chronological marker for the fixation of written texts, since in Bali texts can migrate from oral to written and back again, as I have described elsewhere.[12]

Thus, I argue that it is not so much the advent or existence of literacy that seems to cut short the improvisational nature of performance as some other factor. More compelling, in my view, is the argument that once the context or social environment changes sufficiently and the influence and power of performances is lost, then the use a society has for such improvised performances diminishes. This observation finds support in Lord's reports on how the South Slavic singers had previously been more widely respected. Improvisation will cease when the group that benefited from such performances (be they the sponsors or the audiences) loses interest in either paying for a performance or in attending it. In what follows below I will explore evidence supporting my suggestion that it is societal change—"context" (in its widest, "Balinese" meaning) rather than the advent or existence of literacy—that marginalizes oral improvised performance in a society.

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[12] See de Vet 1996 for Balinese texts. Briefly summarized, performers employ a special "performance language," or *Kunstsprache*, which in Bali, for instance, can be used for both the written and the oral medium. Whereas in most Western cultures there is a marked difference between how people express themselves in writing and how they express themselves orally, the Balinese *Kunstsprache* is amenable to both media. This overlap (or coinciding) of what are to us two distinct ways of expression makes it difficult to apply Western categories: written texts are not necessarily more formal, nor do they employ more complex terms, nor do they use more abstractions, etc. The lines are drawn differently in Austronesian languages in general. The performance language is special: the performer has active knowledge of it, while the members of the audience may vary in their fluency of understanding. It is for this reason that many performers provide translations into the local vernacular in "asides." The situation is further complicated by the high number of registers (particular varieties of the common language appropriate for certain situations) that the Balinese use in everyday communication: caste, class, gender, location, age, and the situation in which one finds oneself all influence not only vocabulary and expression but also body language, silences, and ultimate outcomes of conversations. Specialists have counted multiple registers in everyday Balinese; add to this the *Kunstsprache* of the performances and the "registers" that the performer uses to depict conversations between, say, a king and a divine giant (who is higher in status? only a Balinese performer can answer this question!), followed by the need to translate this elevated conversation into the local dialect (while still observing status differences between characters, while not forgetting the status of the audience and their level of understanding), and one can see how intricate it can all become. See also Zurbuchen 1987:63-81.

Anthropology, Archeology, and Performance Studies

There are three related fields that offer more formal and theoretical support for this hypothesis. After highlighting the theoretical concepts developed by each field, I will show how these theories can be applied to the ancient material, emphasizing "context" in each instance.

Anthropology is the first field to be examined. It provides comparative material on contemporary societies practicing oral performance, where the poetry reflects, and affects, the societies themselves. Bali is just one of many cases, as I stated above. Other scholars have written on performance in India, and elsewhere in Indonesia, where similar traditions of performance are found.[13] The second discipline is archaeology. Anthropology and archaeology are closely related and frequently utilize the same theoretical frameworks. However, archaeologists work with populations that are no longer extant, so they must find material evidence and other sources to support their interpretations. In the case of classical archaeology, of course, there are the ancient texts as well. Nonetheless, these texts should be approached with less certainty than is often the case, since they are burdened with two thousand years of interpretation. The third and final field is performance studies, which teaches that the staging of a performance in any society brings with it particular requirements and limitations. These shared constraints concerning the creation of performances allow us to make some general inferences that apply across cultures.

Anthropology

At the beginning of the twentieth century (or thereabouts), anthropologists and classicists shared common interests. When anthropologists began to ask the question "Why do people in different societies act and think the way they do?" they only rephrased a question already posed by Renaissance scholars, as the early Humanists pondered the differences between Christians, Greeks, Romans, Jews, themselves, and any other newly encountered populations.[14]

In the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first few decades of the twentieth century a second wave washed over all fields, bringing the first systematic analyses of "primitive" tribal societies. Sir James Frazer set the example for many of his successors when in 1890 his *Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion* was published. This work kept on growing and was published multiple times; it is still in print today. In the English-speaking world the works of the Cambridge school provide a good example of the influence of such anthropological studies: Jane Harrison's *Themis* appeared in 1912, Gilbert Murray's *The Four Stages of Greek Religion* also dates from 1912, and Francis (Macdonald) Cornford's *The Origin of Attic Comedy* was published two years later. The basic premise that the younger scholars developed was that all ritual, rites, and dramatic performances in Greece were derived from a "primal ritual," or *Sacer Ludus*. This "primal ritual" had several stages, of which vestiges could be found in all plays.

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[13] See, for instance, Hiltebeitel 1999; Brückner 1995; Tol 1990 for a Buginese tradition; Blackburn et al. 1989; Flueckiger and Sears 1991; Lutgendorf 1994; Richman 1991; Honko 2000.

[14] See Grafton 1997 and MacGormack 1997.

The classicists of that time imagined that theatrical performances could be placed on an evolutionary ladder: first there was ritual, and gradually performances and theater became detached from their primal *raison d'être*, ritual. With modifications, this belief continues. But, as anthropologists point out, all societies have theater, performances, and rituals, and games and sports as well. So rather than investigate which came first, or which gave birth to which, an investigation of why rituals, performances, and sporting events so often take place together would seem more fruitful. Many dissimilar events exist under the umbrella of festivals, and thus festivals must be seen as providing the context for performances. The identification of the main objective of festivals is thus potentially relevant to the question of the ultimate purpose of performances. For Bali the goal of performances has already been discovered: to please the gods, and to influence public opinion and action. One of the main actors, so to speak, in this public relations event is the performer of epic or historical poetry. To facilitate his goal, and to ensure that he is up to date, the performer relies on improvisation.

In what follows I will briefly describe some general characteristics of festivals, and argue that they match the driving force behind Balinese performances. My main purpose is to uncover what further information can be extracted from the ancient Greek data to shed light on performances of the Homeric epics.

Activities such as festivals, in which an entire community participates at a scheduled time and place, promote social cohesion and (may) prevent conflict. As Victor Turner writes, "every type of cultural performance, including ritual, ceremony, carnival, theatre, and poetry, is explanation and explication of life itself" (1982:13). Here Turner broadens van Gennep's account of the three phases in a rite of passage: *separation, transition, and incorporation*, but gives it a more positive twist by positing that shared liminality could bring about a state of *communitas* among participants. By taking part—and everyone has to take part—individuals and groups accept their allotted position in society. Frequent repetition of such occasions reminds citizens, women, children, foreigners, and slaves of where they stand in a literal sense. In addition, those who organize festivals obtain plenty of symbolic capital, of course.

In ancient Greece, every major city sponsored annual festivals bringing together the entire polity and its periphery. People from all over flocked to the cities to participate, to watch, or to play their part in the economic exchanges made possible by the presence of so many people from so many different areas. For this discussion I have selected the Panathenaia, given that the performance of the Homeric epics are known to have formed part of the events. Of all festivals, the Panathenaia, which took place every year on a small scale and every fourth year on a more international level, are the best known. Textual information on this festival is fairly reliable, and there are many archeological remains for fifth-century Athens as well. Of particular interest will be whose point of view was propagated to influence public opinion and action.

The events incorporated in the Panathenaia were mostly of a competitive nature: there were individual competitions, athletic as well as artistic, tribal athletic contests, manly beauty contests, and so on. The emphasis on competition seems to contradict Turner's point, which stresses unification and coming together. However, the purpose of competition in the games was ranking of the participants, and implied acceptance of the ranking principle. Later, all are re-unified by participating in larger events. Thus, at the Panathenaia we see communal dancing, all-

night wakes, processions, sacrifice, and the sharing of food at the very end, bringing together all both physically and symbolically.

Of particular interest is that our textual sources highlight the formulation of rules for the organization of the festival in the sixth and fifth century BCE, when democracy in Athens was coming into its own. And, on the surface, the festival appeared to be based on democratic principles. For instance, the organizers for this festival were chosen by lot from the ten tribes, as *The Constitution of Athens* (60.1-3) informs us. One would think that this would have provided an excellent opportunity to shed the competitive aspects. But the opposite happened: even though democracy implies equality (at least of all free-born, male citizens), it is at precisely this time that the competitive aspect of the festival gained greater prominence, as more groups began to participate. This development was possible, I believe, because the entire (original) structure of the festival was hierarchical and aristocratic, and so the elected or chosen participants had to follow patterns and strategies from which they could not deviate. Moreover, the duties assigned to the elected officials or those drawn by lot lasted at the most four years. Thus, rather than equality for the entire population of Attica, the activities at the Panathenaia (and elsewhere) endorsed *in*equality, and promoted acceptance of this inequality. The point of view that comes to the fore during festivals, then, is not that of the *dêmos*. So whose ideology was furthered in festivals and, by extension, in performances?[15]

The story of the mythical origins of the Panathenaia give us our first clue. The festival was thought to have been instituted by mythical kings or rulers, by Theseus or king Erichthonius, and to have been remodeled and enlarged by the historical statesmen Cleisthenes, Pisistratus, and Hipparchus. Thus, the mythical beginnings of the Panathenaia were linked to royalty, to the aristocracy, and to the Acropolis. Over time, new groups were included as full participants in the main festival and events proliferated. But each additional event followed the same pattern as the already existing activities, promoting competition, the ability to win a prize, and glory for the winner's tribe. In short, the goal of every event continued to be the same: the ranking of people and groups in relation to one another. After having been reordered in this way, all were re-"incorporated" during the final feasting.

The processions of the Great Panathenaia further illustrate the ordering principle. Processions serve as "ranking" systems *par excellence*: where one walks, what one carries, what one wears clearly signal one's position relative to the other members of that society. The greater the potential for conflict in a society, the more attention is paid to this kind of thing. Thucydides' story about the murder of Hipparchus, the brother of the tyrant Hippias, during the Panathenaic festivities is revealing. Hipparchus was murdered for personal reasons: he had used his powerful political position to bar the sister of a young man from participating in some other procession. The young man and his lover planned to murder both brothers in revenge, but Hippias escaped being murdered, we are told, because he was "arranging the order in which the several parts of

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[15] By "ideology" I mean that particular set of beliefs, ideals, assumptions, and customs that belong to a dominant group in a society, and to which most members of that society subscribe, consciously or unconsciously. It is transmitted from one generation to the next, and from one group in society to another. Thus an ideology is not only a reflection of a particular worldview, but also a lesson that is taught and learned over a lifetime. The imposition of one group's ideology on others is obviously the goal; ideology can thus be understood as a source of social power.

the procession were to go forward," and it would have been too dangerous to kill him in front of so many (Thuc. 6.56-57).

The above anecdote, as well as our knowledge of the organization of the entire festival, reveals that those in charge, those who formed the backbone and provided continuity, belonged to the aristocratic and wealthiest families of Athens. Assistance and assistants were obtained, by lot, from other free Athenians; but, like the events added on to the festival, the new jobs were also made to fit an existing pattern. The performance of heroic poetry, in the form of the Homeric poems, becomes more understandable: it was a means to proclaim the enduring value of the aristocracy to all citizens at once.

Archaeology

Archaeology is the second field for our investigation of the context of ancient performance. Archaeology has of old been the stand-by for classicists on such topics as the material culture of the Bronze and Iron Ages, and archaeological finds were interpreted as illustrative of the heroic lifestyle. As Morris observed, "classical archaeology was text-driven, trying to illuminate philology, not challenge it" (2000:89).

How can archaeology help us challenge our textual biases? Can archaeology provide a context for performances of the Homeric poems beyond ruins of theaters or depictions of *rhapsodes* or *aoidoi* on vases? Can the archaeology of ancient Greece confirm, or refute, the schema developed in the preceding section on anthropology? Ideally, then, archaeology should confirm that there existed a physical context that allotted great importance to public space. At the same time, it should show that the aristocracy held ideological supremacy in all matters of importance, and reveal the existence of mechanisms of ranking. Finding such evidence would support the argument made earlier for performance as a likely tool in the tug for supremacy between *dêmos* and aristocracy.

Over the past decade or so, archaeologists have begun to interpret objects and buildings as transformations of beliefs, ideas, values, and stories into physical realities. Buildings, monuments, and objects are seen as "materializations" of ideology, and as such indicate whose interests ranked highest. For example, structures (especially large ones meant for assemblies and performances) are viewed as materializations of collective social action. Thus Athens, which relied on corporate power, constructed many public edifices after its destruction by the Persian army. In less than 60 years, the Athenians built walls around their city and its port, a job begun by Themistocles and finished under Pericles in 445. Pericles is credited with the reconstruction of temples and other religious buildings. Completed were the Parthenon, the temple to Athena Nike, the Erechtheion, the Propylaea, the Theseion, the Panathenaic road, and most temples in the lower city. Public buildings comprised the Tholos, the southern Stoa, the stoa of Zeus Eleutherios, the tribunal in the Agora, the Pompeion, and the Sacred Gate. The Agora itself underwent restructuring; also built were the theater of Dionysus, and the Odeion, a covered theater where the Homeric performances supposedly took place.[16] In brief, all construction was intended to provide various types of public spaces, some explicitly meant for ritual and

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[16] See Travlos 1972.

performances. During the Panathenaia, all the newly built sites were activated at once, linking them in a vast web.

By contrast, a city like Sparta, with one group firmly in control and no need to foster group collaboration, did not spend its resources on something so unnecessary. This we learn from Thucydides, to whom the connection "impressive buildings: power" was not unknown. Comparing Athens and Sparta, he prophetically remarks how (Thuc. 1.10.2; trans. R. Crawley),

> . . . if Lacedaimon were to become desolate, and the temples and the foundations of the public buildings were left, that as time went on there would be a strong disposition with posterity to refuse to accept her fame as a true exponent of her power . . . the city is neither built in a compact form, nor adorned with magnificent temples and public edifices . . . if Athens were to suffer the same misfortune, I suppose that any inference from the appearance presented to the eye would make her power to have been twice as great as it is.

While the massive construction program in Athens appears to demonstrate the communal power of the people, the organizing power behind it came from the aristocracy. Members of the aristocracy orchestrated the effort, allotted the money, and gave the orders—and the craftsmen and artists owed their income to the goodwill of the elite. The huge theaters, an innovation at the time, presented audiences with a physical setting that must have reminded them of the descriptions of royal palaces in the Homeric poems, or the impressive (royal) architecture that existed elsewhere in the ancient world. Even though the monumental city expressed shared power, at the same time its theaters, temples, and assembly halls "materialized" aristocratic grandeur and the stories told about past glory, when the aristocracy reigned supreme.

The Parthenon frieze with its impressive depiction of a Panathenaic procession provides an excellent illustration of the materialization of ideology. The frieze shows citizens, foreigners, children, women, and cattle moving *in order;* the motif was repeated on vases and cups. I call attention to the frieze here, since it represents the materialization of an ephemeral event, which itself was already a materialization of the existing social order, as I outlined in the previous section. But it was not only buildings and locations that reminded the inhabitants of the city of their respective places in society. Objects, too, could deliver powerful messages. For instance, the winners of the games and competitions received as prizes amphorae filled with sacred olive oil from the very hands of the aristocratic organizers. These amphorae, as well as smaller copies, have been found all over the Mediterranean world. As prized possessions, accompanied by a story about how they were won, brought, and what they meant, they spread the fame of the city of Athens, its citizens, its rule, and its power.

A further list of "materialized" symbolic objects related to the Panathenaia could be drawn up, but the main point of this discussion was to call attention to the potential of objects to illuminate the ideology of the time. Public space allotted for communal feasting and worship demonstrates the democratic spirit of Athens, but the style, scale, and the decorations betray the persistence of aristocratic values. A prize amphora may say something about a winner, but it also says something about the giver of the prize, the event itself, and ultimately the context of its reception.

Archaeology thus confirms the existence of an ideological contest between the *dêmos* and members of the aristocracy, expressed in buildings and objects, and in the choice of ephemeral events to be depicted, that is, "materialized," in the communal space. What remains to be discussed are the technical aspects of creating a performance under such circumstances. If context is so important, how then would a performer of the Homeric epics bring his material to market? How would he continue to please his audience, which is engaged in an ever-changing political and ideological competition? How would he convince? The answers to such questions can be found in performance theory, the last field to be discussed.

Performance Theory

Performance theory, a hybrid discipline that borrows from anthropology, folklore studies, and linguistics, focuses in part on the physical requirements of the staging of performances, a topic that bears directly on our interest in "context" and the influence of context on the shaping of performances. The importance of performance studies for our understanding of the purpose of performances, and how these goals affect the performative event, has increased over the last ten to fifteen years. Here I want to look at just a small sub-section of these new findings: the rules that govern performances. There are physical limitations and requirements that every performer and performance faces, no matter where or in which society. Richard Schechner, who is both anthropologist and stage director, has explored the constraints, internal as well as external, that are imposed on performers and performances. He suggests that the force of the constraints is applied differently depending on whether a performance is improvised or enacted from a memorized script.

Schechner divides the performative event into different frames that fit inside each other. Each frame governs certain rules, or expectations. The first and largest (outer) frame is the *performance* itself: the entire event, including audience, technicians, play, musicians, and so on. *Space*, the second frame, refers to the locale: in Western society, it is usually a theater building, concert hall, stadium, or the stage itself. The *conventions*, or third frame, are culturally determined; they represent the expectations of the audience of how "acting" is done, or of what can and cannot be shown in a performance. The next frame, *drama*, is the text written by the author. For instance, a tragedy has different rules from a comedy and so on.

The fifth frame is formed by the *director*, who will impose his rules or ideas on the actor. At the center of the performance stands the *actor* himself. We have moved from the outer frame, the performance, to the center. Each frame has its particular set of rules, and "each inner frame contains within it the rules established by frames further out" (Schechner 1988:14). Based on his twenty-five years of experience in the theater and of observing performances worldwide, Schechner states that "there is an 'axiom of frames' which generally applies in the theater: the looser an outer frame, the tighter the inner, and conversely, the looser the inner, the more important the outer" (*idem*).

To understand the relevance of Schechner's frames, we have to bear in mind that we look at this from the performer's perspective. In the West, the outermost frame is clearly defined: an audience that pays and wants to see the performance. The music, the play, the technicians—all is decided even before the performer is hired. The audience does not influence these choices,

although producers of course try to guess what may please. Second, we have the theater, with a stage, and lights, and the customary props. Again, a Western actor does not control this frame. Now the third frame: the "cultural conventions." In the West, an actor is supposed to act natural—there are certain ways to be funny or speak tragically, certain ways to do Shakespeare or historical plays—but on the whole the conventions are not very burdensome. The fourth frame, consisting of the play or drama, controls the Western actor. He must know it by heart, he must memorize it and he cannot change it. The director, who makes up the fifth frame, controls the actor even more: he tells him where to stand, when to sit, when to cry, when to speak, and so on. And ultimately, at the center is the actor himself, with enormous pressure. Is he or she the right person for the role? Is he or she young or old enough? Beautiful enough? Is he or she well cast? So we see that in Western theater we move from loose outer frames to very constricting inner frames.

In Balinese performances the frames are weighted very differently. It is almost the opposite of the Western approach. Again, I start at the periphery. The subject, the topic, the play, is selected by the performer himself from a range of possible stories. His goal is to please his audience or engage them, so the outermost frame puts most pressure on him. He controls the musicians and the attendants. The second frame, the performance space, can be anywhere: a busy festival, a beach, a place where members of the community may have traveled for purification rituals, or a temple courtyard. So it is up to the performer to establish where the action depicted in his performance is taking place: a court? a temple? the fifteenth century? Java? The third frame, the "cultural conventions," is very strong: there are certain languages and registers, kinds of expressions, and verb forms that can be used in only one kind of play and not in another. Gestures, facial expressions, poses, eye movements, dress, music, voice, intonation are all decided by the medium; they include stock characters and situations, audience expectations of actor's behavior, and so on. However, a good actor learns these things fairly quickly, and therefore the pressure is less. The next frame is formed by the "drama" itself. As I have already explained, in Bali there is no such thing. There is no unitary dramatic text that must be performed; instead, there are notebooks, plot outlines, written stories, complete scripts in verse—texts which have been around for a millennium, if not longer. It is up to the actor to make something from them. Most remarkably, there is no forced memorization. The next frame, the director, is also missing. Again, it is the actor who decides where to stand, how to speak. At the center, there is the Balinese performer. He has total freedom. The inner frames are so loose that they hardly exist.

Transferring Schechner's frame analysis to Greek performances and performers in contexts such as the Panathenaia brings interesting results.[17] As stated before, most performances formed part of festivals, and took place in front of a diverse population. The audience generally did not pay; the musicians, the topic, and all else was coordinated by the performer himself (Plato, *Ion*: *passim*; Hdt. 1.23-24). Thus a Greek performer of historic poems, for instance, had more responsibility for the success of the first frame than his modern Western colleague. The

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[17] To continue to comparison of "like with like," I am avoiding the competitions of plays involving numerous actors and a chorus, which evolved during the fifth century BCE and began to require the use of a director, customarily also the author of the play or set of plays.

second frame, space, did not become fixed until the middle of the fifth century, when the first permanent theaters were built. But even with established performance space, the performer still had to explain where he was, what time the action was taking place, who his characters were, and so on. There were no helpful props: providing the time-frame for the story depended on the actor. The third frame, conventions, was genre-related. Performers of the Homeric poems dressed up in imaginative fancy costumes. For the audience, just seeing the costume defined who the performer was representing. The fourth frame, "drama," is the text to be performed, and of course this is the core point of many arguments. Did the Greek performers of the Homeric poems memorize written or oral texts or, as I argue, did they improvise? Many, unfamiliar with improvising performers, argue that such long texts *must* have been memorized: how else could the ancient language and its oral aspects have been preserved? However, the attraction of Schechner's framework is that it gives a plausible and practical explanation for continued improvisation. How a Balinese or Indian performer learns the performance language and maintains the oral style is described elsewhere.[18]

The fifth frame is the director. But performers of the Homeric poems did not have directors; it was not until tragedies and comedies took on their familiar (to us) shape that their authors became directors at the same time, and told actors what to do. Performers of Homer never had directors. We have now reached the center: the performer himself. If Schechner is correct, then the performer of Greek epic poetry would have had considerable freedom.

Conclusions

I will briefly restate the main points as they apply to ancient Greece, and move from more general to specific points.

The setting, or context, in which the performer during the Panathenaia found himself was a festival: an event that glorified the unity of the Athenians and their immediate neighbors, and which had as its underlying and unifying theme a more abstract and general concept, "Greekness." The entire festival was concerned with grouping people, ordering these groups, and uniting them into one large harmonious society by the end of the festival. The ultimate goal was to persuade all that they found themselves in the right place—socially (hierarchically), politically, and economically. Hierarchy, and respect for hierarchy, counted. Persuasion, especially in a *polis* that relied on consensus for its survival, counted as well.

The concept of materialization, developed by archaeologists, gives further substance to the above observations. The physical context of Athenian *polis* demonstrated the great emphasis that it placed on democratic rule. Consensus was expressed in massive buildings, especially after the Persian Wars had destroyed the city, and the Athenians found it necessary to "re-imagine" their city from the ground up. But the archaeological evidence associated with the Panathenaia also shows the persistence of aristocratic values, most clearly in the emphasis on the depiction of rank orders in the competitions, prizes, performances, processions, and so on. Societies concerned with equality, consensus, and democracy are not concerned with ranking; it is

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[18] See de Vet 1996:43-76.

therefore significant that Athenian society should have become so obsessed by it. The tone of the festival continued, or emphasized, the values held by the aristocracy of old, and the festival gained in size and glory just as the aristocracy was losing its unquestioned and direct economic and political supremacy.

Performances are "materialized" history, and it is in this sense that we should consider the increased importance given to the performance of the Homeric poems. It was not that the poems were unknown before the time of Pisistratus, but they gained in importance because they were able to deliver the aristocratic code in palatable fashion. If I am correct, then the ancient stories on how the Homeric poems were introduced into the city, or why they gained in prominence, become more understandable. The loss of political and military power drove the aristocrats to seek new venues in which to assert their power. This is the social context in which performances took place.

Schechner's framework theory further confirms the importance of context on the shaping of performances. Unlike Western theatrical performances, where the context and outer frames have very little weight and certainly do nothing to promote unity and a sense of belonging among its audiences, ancient performances played an important part in societal harmony. The constraint of having to please an audience by the appropriateness of the content of his performance can help us understand how a poet or performer under such circumstances would respond. Given that the performer found himself bound by the outer frames to a much higher degree than a present-day Western performer, we would expect him to be able to improvise. Like his later Balinese colleague, he may have had at his disposal multiple versions of the poems, both oral and written. The ancient performer commanded a performance language, and had stock characters, themes, masks, and fixed expressions at his disposal. All these were tools that could help him skirt the sensibilities of both *dêmos* and aristocrats. Rather than a relic from the past, or an indulgence of aristocratic nostalgia, the Homeric performances could be made relevant to matters immediately at hand. Competitions—and we know that there were competitions of reciters of the Homeric poems—would be made more exciting and interesting depending on the improvisational skills of the various performers.[19] How well could they highlight a certain conflict, for instance, so that it might shed light on current controversy? How well could a performer describe a battle, so that all the veterans in the audience were mentally brought back to similar traumatic events? How well could a performer postpone and lengthen recognition scenes, teasing the audience? The outlines of all the Homeric stories were known—as similar stories are known in Bali. Yet to tell these stories masterfully, again and again, requires improvisation and not repetition of the already known.

Two themes dominate events in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*: unity in the face of division and a respect for social hierarchy, even if, on some occasions, the characters seem about to rebel. The Homeric epics formed excellent vehicles for achieving the goals of unity: their underlying Pan-Hellenic theme ensured that even enemy cities and states could be shown to have (had)

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[19] Plato's *Ion* (530a-42b) is the most obvious example. When Ion encounters Socrates, the first question he is asked is about his performance at the competition in Epidaurus, and his prospects for the upcoming one on the occasion of the Panathenaia in Athens. Jenifer Neils (1992, 1996) examines the archaeological record and inscriptions about performances, contests, and prizes.

something in common. Moreover, the Greeks prided themselves on defeating the Persian army not so many decades ago—no wonder poems celebrating similar heroic acts gained such popularity. Participants and audiences from all over Hellas could enjoy and absorb any other messages that were also included besides unity against a common eastern enemy. On a less generic level, both poems strongly emphasize aristocratic values as a unifying theme. Singled out for praise is a special quality: respect for hierarchy. Although Achilles rebelled against personal injustice and insult, in the end he participated in the war. His death was not part of the poems, but every single audience member knew that he was doomed. The aristocratic code, reinforced by the poetry, would not let him escape.

The *Odyssey* delivers similar messages. The Pan-Hellenic theme of unity does not have to be foregrounded, because it is a given; Troy has been taken by the united force of the Greeks. Now the nobility returns to their respective homes. The return story or *nostos* of one Greek leader is chosen, Odysseus. His followers and minor nobility perish on the way home: most because of disobedience, and some unfortunate ones because of blind obedience—those who believed that nothing would happen when the ship had to sail between Scylla and Charybdis. It also shows, of course, the absolute power of the (aristocratic) leader. Once back on Ithaca, an additional number of noblemen are killed by three generations of Odysseus' clan for being unruly and disrespectful during his absence, for not remembering that Odysseus is their lord and master, and for not respecting hierarchy.

There was a further message in the *Odyssey* for the attending Athenian audiences: Odysseus is helped all along by Athena—in whose honor the Panathenaia took place. It was clear that the goddess favored clever aristocrats. But Odysseus had one major gift that made him an even better aristocrat than many others, including Achilles: he had the gift of suasion, which crosses social and geographical boundaries. Just as in the *Iliad* he had been able to stop the army from returning home, or in the Odyssey he could befriend a goatherd, or sway his wife, so he could, by the sheer rightfulness of his position and the help of the Goddess, reclaim his kingdom, and avoid his own killing at the hand of the relatives of the murdered suitors.

At the same time, the Athenian aristocrats also had to show that they were not high-handed; after all, their city (as many other cities) functioned on democratic principles and believed in consensus. Thus, while the poems emphasized aristocratic values, they left some room for seemingly democratic assemblies. I argue that the assembly scenes in the *Iliad* are not misremembered remnants from a once historical past when nobles supposedly used assemblies to agree on a joint course of action, but rather intrusions of a present riddled with assemblies as a standard for group participation and joint social action. The assembly scenes reassured democratic audiences that the old aristocracy had always firmly supported the principle of consensus.

Taken together, the different findings from anthropology, archeology, and performance studies help gain insights into the context of the Homeric poems and the possible influence of these contexts on continued performances. These findings also highlight the motives for the performance of this particular kind of poetry and the influence that the poems may have exercised. I suggested that the poems' important role in social cohesion would encourage *improvised* performances to fit the occasion rather than *memorized* ones. I also showed that improvised performance is not a characteristic of oral societies alone, but that performers in

highly literate societies are equally capable of taking advantage of the flexibility provided by oral improvised performance. Taken a step further, the possible existence of oral improvised texts alongside written ones raises further questions concerning text-fixation, and whether it is likely that such an event took place at the advent of the alphabetic writing system or a little later, or whether text-fixation (especially of such well-known poetry as the Homeric poems) could have occurred as late as the third century BCE. It also puts in question whether "text-fixation" in itself is a phenomenon that is universal—but the answer to that question exceeds the issues addressed in this paper, and forms part of the subject of my current book-length project. [20]

Comparative research has provided new insights into performance, context, and improvisation. Milman Parry, by going to the Former Yugoslavia in the 1930s, showed the importance and relevance of fieldwork. His investigations provided us with fascinating opportunities to explore the past as well as the present. But our work is not done: more and more "new traditions" (if this is not a contradiction in terms!) are being discovered and recorded, for the benefit of both scholars and the communities themselves. To me, Parry's work presented an open invitation to explore further afield, and to investigate the Balinese performance traditions to find out why their singers—literate, semi-educated, illiterate, talented or not so talented—continued to improvise in performance. The Balinese performers conformed to all the "rules" that Parry and Lord discovered among the South Slavic *guslari* for their improvisations, but they also relied on written texts and a literary tradition that could trace its roots to ancient India. In the end, it turned out that the role performance plays in Balinese society was the deciding factor.

Parry and Lord's willingness to examine living singers to shed light on past performers was daring: it gave rise to a vast re-examination of medieval poetry, folk poetry, and other traditions, like the Siri epic studied by Honko, for instance. And surely, much more remains to be discovered. So before we conclude that we have reached our goal and now know how Homeric performances and textualization "eigentlich gewesen"—or had really happened, in the famous words of the nineteenth-century German historian Ranke—we should perhaps be mindful of the equally worthy and philosophical words of Madé Tantra, spoken in the mid-1930s and quoted at the beginning of this essay: "It is not yet certain; the story has not emerged."

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[20] For modern oral poetry the impulse toward textualization appears to come from the outside, as Honko shows in his overview of eleven oral traditions and the scholars who recorded the songs, from Lönnrot and the *Kalevala* at the beginning of the nineteenth century to John D. Smith and the P_b_ji epic of Rajasthan during the 1980s (Honko 1998:169-215).

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